

A LOOK BACK

AN EASTER ISLAND REPORT FROM 1869

The following is a report published in the *London Times* from January 21, 1869 by W. A. Powell, who was on board the HMS *Topaze* during its visit to Easter Island the previous year. Powell would later incorporate some of this text into an 1899 article published by the South Australian Branch of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia but this first report (presented verbatim) manages to encapsulate many of the "prototypical" aspects of Easter Island accounts – including the erroneous guano mines story and a few largely forgivable inaccuracies, some of which may derive from the fact that Powell didn't have much, if any, direct contact with Easter Islanders. Thus, his source material was second-hand, most likely via missionaries and Rapa Nui informants.

Shawn McLaughlin

EASTER ISLAND

London Times
Thursday, January 21, 1869
by W. A. Powell

We have been favoured by the Secretary of the Admiralty with the following detailed report upon Easter Island, or Rapa-nui:

Topaze, at Valparaíso, Dec. 3, 1868

Sir, – I have the honour to submit for the information of the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty the following detailed report upon Easter Island, or Rapa-nui (Great Rapa); Hanga-roa, lat. 27 deg. 10 min. S., long. 109 deg. 26 min. W., where the *Topaze* remained at anchor from the 1st to the 7th of November.

This island, which is 29 miles in circumference¹, is of a triangular shape, the northern and southern extremes being from 1,000ft. to 1,500ft. high², sloping down towards the centre. So numerous, however, are the craters which rise up that the land cannot anywhere be called low. The soil is decomposed lava, of a reddish hue, thickly strewn over with black lava stones.

The coast is rock-bound, and there are only two or three sandy creeks in all its extent. To the north and south it

is high and precipitous, allowing of no landing, except in one snug little cove on the northern shore; on the east and west the coast is low and much indented, so that, although rocky, landing may be effected in some places on the side that happens to be leeward. Cook's-bay, or Hanga-roa, on the western shore, affords good anchorage from October till April, the season of the trades; in other months it is often a lee shore, but from the trend of the land a moderately-found ship could always get away should it be necessary to put to sea. In the accompanying plans the best anchorage is laid down, and I should not recommend vessels to anchor inside 16 fathoms³; the ground then becomes hard, and further in there are large boulders. As we made the land during the night and left in the evening, I can give no accurate description of its appearance at a distance; but, judging from what I saw on a fine moonlight night, it would, if made from the east or west, look like two islands.

On a near approach its aspect is not inviting; the coarse brown grass which covers the land scarcely looks like verdure, and not a tree is to be seen; there is some brush-wood resembling the mimosa⁴, and also the paper mulberry, or cloth plant, growing at the bottoms and sides of some of the craters. In one spot on the island there are a few stumps of a large palm, but the trees no longer exist, and I doubt much if wood to any extent ever did exist. The missionaries have within the last three years planted a garden, and vegetables and maize are doing well. Previous to that the vegetable productions were confined to the sweet potato, the plantain⁵, and the sugar-cane.

Early navigators appeared to have left pigs and goats, which became very numerous, but they have latterly been all killed off, and rats are the only animals left. A few sheep have now been imported, and they thrive well; the domestic fowl has long been in the island, but there is no other land bird, and of sea birds there are very few. We only saw the tern, the boatswain⁶, and the frigate-birds. Of fish there is very little close in shore, excepting the flying fish; the natives, however, have large stone hooks, with which they used to catch big fish far out at sea. Now they have no canoes or rafts left to go out with. There is very little seaweed; but a kind of moss, which grows on the rocks just under water, is eaten by the natives⁷. The water in the different wells on the island is brackish, but at the bottom of some of the craters fresh water is to be had in abundance. There are no reptiles and very few insects.

¹ Easter Island is more like 34 miles in "circumference" (13×11×10 miles).

² The highest point on Easter Island, Maunga Terevaka, is 1,758 feet above sea level.

³ 1 fathom = 6 feet, so 16 fathoms would equal 96 feet.

⁴ The "mimosa" referred to here is almost certainly the Toromiro tree (*Sophora toromiro*), which once grew in abundance on Easter Island but is now extinct there. It was described by early explorers as a mimosa-like shrub reaching up to 9 feet in height, with stems described as the "thickness of a man's thigh".

⁵ The "plantain" referred to here is more likely the banana (*maika*; *Musa* sp.) which, as Pollock notes, would have been eaten green rather than yellow and thus resembled the more common appearance of the plantain, which was not known on Easter Island.

⁶ "Boatswain" is another name for the predatory "Skua" bird, though the term can be applied to any species of gull of the genus *Stercorarius*.

⁷ Citing a report from one of the officers under La Pérouse, Métraux notes that Easter Islanders were said to eat a kind of seaweed (not moss, which Métraux says was used to prevent leaks in canoes, among other things) which was gathered on the shore.

As regards the climate, the missionaries inform me that from October to April the trade wind is constant, blowing strong for about a fortnight when it commences and leaves off. While we were there it blew hard from the 1st to the 6th of November, but, as was predicted, it became lighter on the 7th, when we left. From April to October the weather is variable, westerly winds prevailing, when there is a good deal of rain. During the trades there are also occasional showers. Thunder and lightning are apparently unknown, and I may mention that neither the shock of the earthquake nor the wave of the 13th of August had been felt⁸.

The island is so destitute of wood and water that it has little to boast of in the way of beautiful scenery; the craters, however, which are very numerous, in some measure relieve the sameness of the view; one of them, on the south side, where the land is about 1,000 feet above the sea, particularly claims notice; it sinks down to the depth of nearly 400 feet⁹, the bottom being a perfect circle of two miles and a half in circumference, quite flat; the sides are steep and regular, except in one place, where there is a large gap just over the sea. Here, standing on the ledge of rock at the edge of the crater, having on one side the sea dashing against the perpendicular cliffs, more than 1,000 feet below, and on the other the crater, with its quiet lakes and green marshes, the view was most striking.

The early history of this isolated people is but little known, even to themselves; the missionaries, who are conversant with their language and live with them, have heard but the one tradition that their ancestors came in a large boat from Rapa, an island in the far west, ages ago; they landed in Ouinipu, a bay on the east side¹⁰. Their King was with them, and he made all the statues out of a quarry that was in a crater where he lived. After a time the people multiplied and spread about, and on one night the statues walked off to where the people were; some fell down on the way, and there they are lying still. The first part of the legend is, perhaps, as reasonable an account of how the island became peopled as any other. The appearance and habits of

the natives are exactly those of the Polynesian race, and their language is so nearly the same that it may be termed a *patois* of the true Kanaka¹¹.

As regards the huge stone figures, there is a mystery about them which gives a greater interest than would otherwise be attached to such rude sculpture. Any real clue as to when they were made is altogether lost, although the natives have names for each of them that have been handed down from former ages. They are busts varying in size from 20 to 33 feet; the features are gigantic, but still in proportion, and somewhat resemble the present race. There must be about 200 of them in different parts of the island¹², but many are so defaced and worn away by the weather that it is not easy to tell what they once were. The quarry where they were cut is on the side of a crater, and there the figures are still to be seen in their unfinished state in every stage; some with the features carved out of the solid rock, but still attached to it, others so far hewn away that a little more labour would have separated them.

A number of the statues are still standing round the crater, and have a most singular and even imposing appearance. Those that stood on the platforms near the sea are now lying on the ground broken; the platforms, which were of very large blocks of stone, cut with great nicety, have also fallen into decay.

According to all accounts there must a few years since have been about 3,000 inhabitants¹³, and it is probable the numbers varied very little. They were divided into tribes, each person having a small portion of land; the chief, however being a larger proprietor. Periodically a King was elected by the chiefs, who, when the sea birds began to lay, assembled on a promontory on the south side of the island, and the one who found the greatest number of eggs was proclaimed king¹⁴. In this choice there was something beyond a mere chance, for the cliffs were steep, and it required both skill and courage to be most successful. Many of them lost their lives in the competition.

The tribes were not, as in some of the Polynesian islands, always at war, but their feuds were just sufficient to

⁸ An earthquake along the northern coast of Chile, registering approximately 8.8 on the Richter scale, occurred on August 13, 1868 and produced a Pacific tsunami that reached as far as Alaska to the north, Antarctica to the south, and Australia to the west, with wave heights ranging from just under 50 feet at Arica to 0.3 feet at Astoria, Oregon.

⁹ Obviously referring to Rano Kau, the circumference estimate is quite close (it's actually 2.92 miles), though current estimates indicate the depth from the caldera rim to the volcano lake below is at least 656 feet. Whether the surface of the lake has receded by more than 200 feet in the past 136 years is another question entirely.

¹⁰ "Ouinipu" would seem to refer to Vinapu, but this does not correspond to the location described in the text ("a bay on the east side") where the legendary landing was supposed to have occurred. It's possible Powell mistakenly used "east" instead of "west", but note, also, that both Cook and Lisjanskij referred to the south coast from Vinapu to Hotu Iti as the "east coast" or "east side".

¹¹ "Kanaka" – a Hawaiian word of Polynesian descent also used in Australia and New Zealand to refer to a "South Sea Islander" (and in particular used disparagingly to describe a laborer in the 19th and early 20th centuries). While its literal meaning is "human being" it has been used to suggest ethnic pride in some contexts while in others it may be taken as derogatory.

¹² Actually, 887 *moai* have been catalogued on Easter Island, of which 288 were allocated for *ahu* disposition and some 200 remain where they fell or were left during transport.

¹³ Population estimates vary widely according to different sources and are difficult to verify, but some figures show 9,600 in 1800 and 8,200 in 1850; by 1870, the population was estimated at 600 and, of course, descended to its infamous low of 110 in 1877.

¹⁴ Though it is on the south side of the island (relatively speaking: "southwest" would be better), Motu Nui is not a "promontory". It's also amusing to note that Powell says the winner of the Birdman competition was he who "found the greatest number of eggs"!

keep down the surplus population and provide the victors with an occasional feast¹⁵. The ships that formerly visited the island appear to have made little impression or change in the people, and only a few years since they must have been the same as they were centuries ago.

The sameness, however, was unexpectedly disturbed by a transaction the details of which were kept so quiet that this is, perhaps, the first time they have been officially noticed. About five years ago the islanders were astonished at seeing a number of ships come into the bay and anchor close to the land. They had colours which are described as Peruvian, and a great many men and boats. The natives, who had then many canoes, crowded round the ships and went on board to barter. Suddenly they were all seized, tied up, and put below; a few got away in the canoes and reached the shore. The people in the ships, finding that no more came off, landed in a number of boats, and by firing their muskets and chasing the natives at last got them hemmed up where they could not well escape, and several hundreds were taken. Some slight resistance was made, and two of the Peruvians were killed with stones. The poor creatures thus kidnapped were taken off (with others that had been obtained at the Marquesas) to the Chincha Islands to work guano¹⁶.

As might be expected, they soon died — indeed, so rapidly that when the Peruvian Government caused the survivors to be sent back at the same time as others who had been kidnapped at the Marquesas were returned to their homes, only a few of the natives of Easter Island remained; they were, however, sent back at the same time, most of them dying in the passage.

This may be termed the turning-point of their history. The King and a number of the chiefs had been carried off by the Peruvians, and in a short time everything fell into anarchy and confusion. The animals were all killed off, and the people lived as they best could, each one plundering his neighbors. Even the restitution of the captives proved a great calamity, for they brought back with them smallpox, and the island was nearly depopulated.

It was while they were in this state that the first missionary landed. He was sent from Tahiti by the Roman Catholic Bishop, and was accompanied by a lay brother and four Kanakas¹⁷. At first his task was a hard one and his life was in constant jeopardy; but, possessed of a mind singularly commanding, he has managed to tame these uncivilized beings, and to begin not only entire control over them, but completely to change their habits. So honest are they now that it is difficult to believe what one has read of their former character. They are to a certain extent industrious, and the rising generation are content with one wife or one husband, an arrangement difficult to carry out where there are twice as many men as women.

Notwithstanding, however, that they have thus been brought into contact with civilization in its least objectionable form, the result appears to be as fatal to their existence as if they had only been visited by the trader with his spirits and gunpowder. When the missionaries first arrived on the island there were nearly 1,500 inhabitants; they are now reduced to 800, and the deaths are in proportion to the births as three to one.

It is impossible to praise too highly the zeal and self-devotion of the missionaries.

Sources and Suggested Reading

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¹⁵ Rapa Nui legends refer to acts of cannibalism and, while it is not hard to believe such activities occurred on the island for a variety of reasons (as with elsewhere in the world), the archaeological record on Easter Island is inconclusive.

¹⁶ There's no reliable evidence to substantiate claims that Easter Islanders were taken to Peru's Chincha Islands to mine guano there; they were instead indentured servants of continental land owners.

¹⁷ The missionary and "lay brother" would be Eugene Eyraud and Hippolyte Roussel, and the "four Kanakas" were Mangarevan assistants.